Writing Cohesion:
Using Content Lexical Ties in ESOL

By Dilin Liu

Lack of cohesion in writing is a problem that plagues many ESOL students.1 How to help students overcome the problem has long been a challenge to ESOL teachers and researchers alike. Yet in dealing with this complex task, many teachers continue to focus mostly on teaching the use of functional connectives such as conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs, overlooking another important element responsible for basic text cohesion: content lexical ties. Many studies have shown that these ties, which involve the use of repetition, synonymy/antonym, and superordinates/ hyponymy among other tools, are an essential cohesive device in native speakers' speeches and writing (Carter and McCarthy 1988; Halliday and Hasn 1976; Halliday 1994; McCarthy 1991; Salkie 1995; Winter 1977 and 1978).

However, the studies seem to have failed to produce much impact on ESOL writing instruction on cohesion. The author's search has yielded no direct studies on the teaching and the use of content lexical ties in ESOL, and most ESOL writing textbooks have either totally neglected the subject or merely mentioned it in passing.

Spencer and Arbon (1996) and Swales and Feak (1994) discussed only functional connectives in addressing the issue of cohesion in their composition books. Reid (1988), while rendering a four-page detailed discussion on connectives, offered only a sketch of less than one page on repetition and synonyms as cohesive devices. Similarly, Ruetten (1997) had merely a short unit on using repetitions for cohesion, while presenting in almost every chapter a unit on using functional connectives. More importantly, neither Reid nor Ruetten mentioned superordinates/ hyponymys as viable cohesive devices. Only Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) included units such as "Class relationship: Classification" and "Class relationship: Definition" on how to use superordinates/hyponyms in writing. No authors seem to have touched on the use of content text-structuring words—a term I will explain later—for cohesion. This absence of content lexical ties in ESOL writing textbooks might partially explain the failure of classroom teachers to address cohesion issue from this important perspective.

Types of Content Lexical Ties

Before further discussing the significance of teaching content lexical ties in ESOL writing, a brief review of lexical cohesion is needed. Lexical cohesion refers to the coherence of a text formed by the use of repetition, synonyms, antonyms, superordinates/hyponyms, related words (Salkie 1995:28–31), and/or text-structuring words (Carter and McCarthy 1988:206–210; Winter 1977, 1978)..

Since repetition, synonyms, and antonyms are well-known terms, their uses for forming text cohesion should be easy to understand. However, superordinates/hyponyms, related words, and text-structuring words are much less familiar nomenclatures.

Superordinates are general words that refer to a class, whereas hyponyms are specific members of the class. Animal, for example, is a superordinate whose hyponyms include words like dog, cat, and chicken. Depending on the context, the writer may go from a superordinate to its hyponyms or vice versa to create text coherence as shown in the example below. Related words refer to those that are normally not considered synonyms or antonyms but that form a synonymic, antonymic, or superordinate/hyponym relationship in the context (Carter and McCarthy 1988; Salkie 1995). They are situational or textual synonyms or antonyms. The vocabulary choice in the following quotation from Gibbs' (1990) article about the extreme optimism of today's youth will exemplify both concepts.

Wild optimism is youth's prerogative, but older women should shudder slightly at the giddy expectations of today's high school and college students. At times their hope borders on hubris with its assumption that the secrets that eluded their predecessors will be revealed to them. "In the 1950s women were family-oriented," says Sheryl Hatch, 20, a broadcasting major at the American University in Washington. "In the '70s they were career-oriented. In the '90s we want to balance. I think I can do both."

The word youth and the phrase high school and college students form a superordinate/ hyponym relationship in which youth is a superordinate to high school and college students. As for related words, there are many in this short passage. Youth versus older, and family-oriented versus career-oriented are obvious examples that may be considered either antonyms or situational antonyms. Wild optimism, giddy expectations, hope, and hubris refer basically to the same thing. They are not usually considered synonyms, but are situational synonyms. The words eluded and revealed would not normally be considered related. Yet in the sentence, they form a contrasting relationship.

Text-structuring words, also known as halfway-house words, are those that fall somewhere between what have been traditionally called content and functional words (Carter and McCarthy 1988; also see Winter 1977). Words such as agenda, (dis)advantage, problem, reason, and feasible may seem to be classifiable as content words in the traditional sense because they are nouns, adjectives, or verbs. However, when we encounter these words in reading, often "we need to do something similar to what we do when we encounter words like it, he and do in texts: we either refer to the bank of knowledge built up with the author, look back in the text to find a suitable referent, or [look] forward, anticipating that the writer will supply the missing content" (Carter and McCarthy 1988). The following sentence is an example: "Despite its many good features, this car has a shortcoming." Both the words features and shortcoming fall into the category of text-structuring words because the reader has to go back to the previous sentences to understand what the good features mean, and wait for an explanation about the shortcoming before learning what it is. That is, both words have to be lexicalized before they make full sense.

Examples of Lack of Content Lexical Ties in ESOL Writing

Lack of cohesion in ESOL students' writing results from many factors, such as incoherent ideas and misuse or insufficient use of functional connectives. Yet as stated earlier, ESOL educators tend to overlook deficient use of content lexical ties as a cause of lack of cohesion in the students' writing. In fact, often our students' lack of cohesion does not result from an absence of

connective words, but from a want of content lexical ties. Furthermore, the lack or misuse of functional connectives is frequently compounded by a want of content lexical ties. Deficient content lexical ties in ESOL students' writing, like other problems that cause incoherence, often leads to confusion or misunderstanding. The following are examples from my students' writings that will illustrate the problem at different levels.

Example 1: Because of ethnocentrism, the [American] students seem to exclude the other race of students [students of other countries]. Most international students studying in high school[s], always feel very sad because they can't make American friends. One of the result[s] is American students' personalities [are] always cold. The other result is that people [who] speak different languages cannot communicate well.

The last two sentences are confusing because the word results, as we know it from the context, does not seem right. The word causes would make much more sense according to the context. So the confusion here arises from a lack of content lexical cohesive ties, not from an absence of connective words, because the student did use—very correctly—two such words, one and the other. The problem illustrated here is rather simple because it results from the student's confusion over two rather basic words: cause and result. Problems like this, though usually easy to correct, are not uncommon with low level students. They suggest a need for more fundamental training in vocabulary, especially in terms of word semantics in context and word collocations.

Example 2: Interchange is published by [the] Cambridge University Press. Different companies publish different programs. Each program differs in its foundations, sequences of strategies, and instructional content; therefore, the weakness of these books is that the vocabulary and content are controlled by [the] publisher.

There are two questionable words in this passage: program and therefore. The word program usually refers to an outline or an order of a conference or performance, and it may also mean a curriculum. But it is never used to refer to books. In addition, publishing companies normally do not publish programs. By using program, rather than the correct word series, to refer to Interchange and other series textbooks like it, the author failed to provide an important lexical cohesive tie, thus causing bafflement to the reader. The word therefore is an incorrect conjunctive adverb connector since the context and logic do not warrant a true cause-effect relationship between the two adjacent sentences. That is, the fact that each publishing company has its own preferences in textbook style and content area does not necessarily constitute a weakness. Instead, such preferences may help the company build up its strengths.

The problems here are more complex than the ones in the previous example. For one thing, the difference between series and program (i.e., the practice of calling sequenced related books a series, not a program) is more difficult for ESOL students to grasp than the difference between cause and result. In addition, whether there is a cause-effect relationship here appears less clear than in the previous example. Since these problems are more difficult for ESOL students to detect, they tend to be of a higher level of difficulty and are likely to bother not only low level students but also many intermediate students.

Example 3: Preschool education is a tremendous advantage for any child before entering a formal classroom environment. However, the home environment of children from birth to five years is the most essential element. Very early in life, children learn how important language is as they communicate with their parents. Even at an early age, children display knowledge of written words.

The first problematic word is advantage. As stated earlier, the words advantage, announcement, and problem function as a halfway house between functional and content words. They need to be lexicalized with the necessary information before they can make sense. In this example, follow-up explanations are needed for the word advantage; that is, in what sense is preschool education a tremendous advantage. The other problematic word is the contrastive connector however, since the two adjacent sentences do not form a contrast. Finally, the author fails to lexicalize the phrase essential element, a text-structuring phrase that should have been followed by an explanation regarding in what sense and for what exactly the environment is essential. Instead, the author simply goes on to discuss what young children can do at home.

Compared with those problems in the previous examples, the problems here are prob-ably most difficult to explain and remedy because they require an understanding of larger and higher discourse structure and call for substantial changes and additions to the text. Even advanced ESOL students often struggle with problems of this nature.

Exercises for Understanding and Using Content Lexical Ties

To help students overcome the above problems, I have designed and used a series of exercises on content lexical ties which have proved helpful. Based on my observation and students' feedback, the exercises increased students' vocabulary and helped them understand better the vocabulary being studied. This is because the exercises enabled students to learn the words in context or in relation to one another as synonyms, antonyms, superordinates, or hyponyms. Also, a better understanding of these words allowed students to use them to improve cohesion in their writing, hence enhancing their writing skills. The exercises are of three major types:

1) finding synonyms, antonyms, superordinates, and hyponyms, or classifying words into these categories; 2) identifying content lexical ties or the lack of them in writing; and 3) creating lexical cohesive ties. Although these exercises can be conducted individually, pair or group work is preferable.

A. Finding/classifying synonyms, antonyms, and so forth

This type of exercise does not require complex preparation by the teacher. The teacher may simply ask students to find synonyms or antonyms for a given word, find hyponyms for a superordinate, or determine the superordinate for a series of hyponyms. Classifying words is also an easy-to-construct exercise. The teacher may give students a fairly large number of words—either all known words or some known and some new words—and have them use various diagrams to classify and arrange the words either as synonyms, antonyms, or superordinates/ hyponyms. The teacher may or may not allow the students to use dictionaries in completing the exercise. Here are a few samples of identification and classification exercises:

Example 1: Find the superordinate for the following words: *Exercises, term paper, book report, composition, research project, lab work, reading* (school assignments or school work).

Example 2: Find the (situational) hyponyms (i.e., related words) for the word program (a teaching or learning *program*).

Example 3: Classify the following words into synonyms/antonyms*: difficult, straightforward, obvious, puzzling, perplexing, clear, confusing, bewildering, simple, hard, easy, lucid, enigmatic*.

B. Identifying content lexical ties (including text-structuring words) or the lack of them in writing

In this exercise students either identify content lexical cohesive ties in written passages (may be as short as one or two sentences) or determine the lack of such ties in writing. The best examples may come from your students' writing. Such exercises call for the students to read the passage very closely and have some familiarity with the various types of lexical cohesive ties. This exercise is best conducted during students' peer critiques in writing when the teacher can have students identify the use of or lack of content lexical ties in each other's papers, discuss them, and make suggestions for improvement.

C. Creating lexical cohesive ties

This type of exercise directly helps students to develop the ability to create or use content lexical cohesive ties in their writing. It can be carried out in a variety of forms and be tailored for students at different levels. Here are a few examples.

Example 1: Using superordinates and hyponyms:

Give students a picture or a series of pictures and have them provide a coherent description of what they see. For example, for a beginning level class, show them a picture of a living room. Then ask them to depict it in writing by starting with the superordinate *furniture* and moving on to its hyponyms, *sofa, chairs, coffee table, entertainment center*, and so forth. For a more advanced class, give students a picture/diagram of the White House, Capitol Hill, and the Supreme Court, and have them describe the United States government. In both examples, students have to come up with appropriate content lexical items that may serve as cohesive devices for their description.

Example 2: Using synonyms/antonyms/ repetitions:

Ask students to write short paragraphs or essays by using the lexical items in question to strengthen the cohesion. For example, have them write an essay on "troubles in English" in which they have to use a series of synonyms for the word *trouble*, such as *difficulty*, *problem*, and *headache*. This activity is most appropriate for intermediate students.

Example 3: Using text-structuring words:

Give students a lead sentence that contains a text-structuring word, and have them lexicalize the word. For example, "John had a good reason not to attend the meeting…." Have students write a

passage in which they will have to use and lexicalize one or two text-structuring words provided for them, such as *merit, idea, convincing*. All levels of students benefit from this activity.

Although I have successfully used all the above exercises with my students (college ESOL students), they may not be useful for all students in all settings. Some adaptations and revisions may be needed for different students in different contexts. However, I am certain that new and more innovative activities will be developed as ESOL educators pay more attention to lexical cohesion in writing.

Conclusion

Studies have demonstrated that content lexical ties are an important cohesive device in writing and that insufficient use of lexical cohesive ties by ESOL students contribute to the lack of cohesion in their writings. Yet so far, ESOL educators seem to have overlooked the issue. More attention should be paid to this topic in research and classroom teaching. The exercises described in this paper are designed to help students better understand cohesive ties and create and use them in their writing. However, many more teaching and learning activities in this area need to be developed to help students write more cohesively.

Notes

1. I am using ESOL to cover both EFL and ESL students and contexts.

2. Carrell (1982) raised questions about this school of thought led by Halliday and Hasan, especially their text cohesion theory. Drawing on the schema theory about text processing as an interactive process, Carrell argues that cohesion is not coherence because the latter involves not only the writer, but also the reader. Yet in the end, she concedes that cohesion studies are of value and that "we should teach our ESL students the cohesive ties available in English" (p. 486). While I appreciate Carrell's comments about the complexity of the coherence issue and the role of the reader in achieving text coherence, her argument seems to put the cart before the horse by missing the priority of the issue. If a text does not have cohesion in the first place, coherence of the text would be very hard to attain, if not totally impossible, no matter how capable the reader may be. Also, content lexical ties, though important, are just one of the many devices and issues in text cohesion. Helping students learn to use these ties alone will not solve all cohesion problems in their writing.

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